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OUR MUSICAL KINSHIP WITH THE SPANIARDS

By GILBERT ELLIOTT, JR.


NO less a personage than Manuel de Falla, of "Three Cornered Hat" fame, recently voiced anew the old complaint regarding the apathy of the Spanish public toward the Spanish composer. "The best theatre in Madrid," he laments, "is at the mercy of Italian publishers. They not unnaturally are engaged in exploiting works of their own countrymen, forcing Spaniards to seek their premières abroad."

This may in a measure account for the small amount of attention recent musical developments in Spain have received. If the Spanish public refuses to take its own composers seriously, it is certainly asking a great deal to demand that foreigners should do so. It is none the less unfortunate, however, for as far as music, at any rate, is concerned it is no longer possible to follow the old blind dictum about Europe ending at the Pyrenees. Especially is it an unfortunate situation for us as Americans. For not only is the present vigorous movement in Spain of vital interest and importance in itself, but from a number of considerations there is something about it which has a special interest for us, something in a sense which proclaims the Spaniards and ourselves musical kin.

For an explanation of this let us cast about a bit among the commonplace things in our American musical life and observe the imprint of the Spaniard. Take negro music, for example, or rather much that passes as genuine negro music, but really is not. Many have shrewdly suspected that the negro originated little and assimilated, transformed and transmitted much, and that while his music has perhaps been exalted far beyond its true importance as far as its negro elements were concerned, it is really a treasure house of things which the negro has absorbed, colored, if you will, and passed on. Among the elements to be discovered in it, a rhythmical reference to things Spanish, particularly to Spanish folk-dances, is one of the most important if not the most important. Where it came from it would be as difficult to determine accurately as it would be to say where certain positive references to Celtic-Scottish Folksongs, appearing in many so-called negro melodies, originated. The important point is that it is there, as a comparison of the rhythms of negro music and Spanish folk-dances and certain things in the compositions of the modern Spanish school will prove, and whether we are inclined to believe with Mr.

Krehbiel, who states in his essay on Afro-American Folksongs that, in South America, Spanish melody has been imposed on negro rhythm (agreed, save as to the rhythm), or to formulate some theory, regarding the common African origin of the Moors, to whom the Spaniards owe the principal characteristics of their music, and our negroes; or to lay the whole matter at the door of Spanish settlements in the West Indies, Florida, and California, is really of secondary importance.

The same is to an extent true of effects which we are prone to call Indian—I refer of course to rhythmic effects. No doubt the Indians use them of their own good right, but when we find very similar effects in Spanish folk-dances, the question comes up as to whether or not the Spaniards did not “beat them to it,” and—more important still—did not give us our taste for them. We find members of our modern Spanish school, to refer to it once more, using them in their compositions. And not having heard of any prohibition in Spain, one can scarcely conceive that they have been interviewing Redmen of the sort that “hootch” can conjure up. As an example of this I have in mind a splendid passage in Albeniz’s “Triana” which shows that in spite of the fact that he never visited this land of Redmen’s songs he was nevertheless clever with his tom-tom—the Indian (?) effect is so good.

But the strongest influence of the Spaniard, the direction in which we feel his kinship most closely, is in our present-day popular music, call it rag, jazz, blues or what you will. In looking over some of this modern Spanish music one would be inclined to think that its authors were intimately acquainted with the intricacies of our rhythms, did we not soon realize that the shoe is on the other foot, that the Spanish folk-dances from which they drew their inspiration, of which more anon, have also in some unknown fashion strongly influenced our jazz. The resemblance shows itself in many ways. Perhaps the most striking is the close resemblance of the triplet figure so familiar in the Habanera, Tango, and other Spanish dances, to a typical syncopation. By making the first note of the triplet a sixteenth instead of an eighth and dotting the second note thus  we produce something that is jazz, but is very close to the Spanish. Inversely, we can Habanerize jazz. It would be a brave man who would say that the ordinary jazz has the requisite grace to be made into a Habanera, but if anyone doubts the possibility of the process I recommend that he play “Dardanella” in Habanera style and note for himself the effects of which this pæan is capable.

Other interchanges of this sort are also possible, although the real strength of the relationship rests rather on an allied spirit of rhythm than on any purely technical connections. So true is this that in the courts where jazz is judged—our ballrooms—many popular Spanish dances of the day, such as those of Valverde, have been found acceptable in their original forms for alternation with jazz numbers. And as the proof of the jazz is in the “feeting”—as it were—no severer test of this rhythmic kinship could be applied. As long ago as in the time of Emmanuel Chabrier, the tendency of the Spaniards to syncopate was noted. He writes, in his “Letters from Spain,” “The dancers themselves syncopate instinctively the measure in a thousand ways, striking with their heels an unbelievable number of rhythms.”

To those of us, of course, who can see no possible connection between these commonplace things of American music and a possible American Art Music—I say possible advisedly—proof of this relation of the Spaniards and ourselves will have little significance. For their benefit I would trace the matter a little further. I would show that it was exactly to this Spanish folk-music which seems so close to us that the modern Spanish school turned as a foundation for their art-music and a source of their inspiration.

“The history of Spanish music during the last twenty-five years,” wrote G. Jean-Aubry in “Le Correspondent” for April, 1916, “is the most marvelous proof of what beautiful works can be produced by the will of those provided not only with natural gifts, but with a precise curiosity.” To this let us add that it was a curiosity which, with full knowledge of the manner in which an art music was up-built in countries far earlier in the field than Spain, was rightly directed toward the only sure foundation for such an art—the wealth of national folk-music.

To be sure, the Spaniard had in addition the heritage of a wonderful tradition. Although long neglected, and preserved only among the ecclesiasts during the centuries when Spanish music amounted to practically nothing, the creations of the glorious sixteenth-century group of church composers who centered about Vittoria and included the names of Cabezon and the Iberianized Italian Domenico Scarlatti, as lovely to-day as when first written, no doubt inspired the modern Spaniard with confidence, that heights once attained by his ancestors could again be mounted. But this tradition could prove a pitfall as well as an inspiration. Fortunately, Felipe Pedrell, who has been to this school very much what Balakireff was to the Russian school of Moussorgsky and Borodin, realized this. Although he has written extensively about

the sixteenth-century ecclesiasts, he guided his pupils and friends away from the slough of church music, at which many Spanish composers still toil commendably, and turned them back to their folk-dances.

For this he had much foreign precedent. Strangers, notably French and Russians, wandering about the peninsula, heard these folk-dances and found them good, later incorporating them in their compositions. In this way such famous and successful compositions as Chabrier's "España," Rimsky-Korsakoff's "Caprice Espagnole," and Debussy's "Iberia," were the result, pieces that are Spanish in the sense that *Carmen* is a Spanish opera, their brilliant Spanish coloring rendering them very successful, but their soul being of other texture.

It is hardly my intention to go into a detailed account of the lives and achievements of the individual members of the modern Spanish school. Mr. Van Vechten in his essays on "The Music of Spain" has written very charmingly about them. Their most interesting feature is that they are the most recent of all nationalistic schools to achieve something of worth, and that twenty-five years ago the music of Spain was in a position similar to that of our own to-day. Then, under the stimulating influence of their French neighbors to the north—Debussy was just having his first successes and Franck was just beginning to gain that appreciation which unfortunately came posthumously—the seed began to bear fruit. Pedrell's two essays, "Músicos Anónimos" and "Por Nuestra Música," dealing largely with the importance of folk-music as the basis of a national Spanish school, may be said to form the literary background of the movement. Strangely enough, although a good prophet, Pedrell does not seem to have been a success as a composer. He has written much, including a gigantic trilogy "Pyrenees" in the Wagnerian manner, but his compositions appear to have been of secondary importance.

An interesting thing about the movement, one in which we again feel our kinship with the Spaniards, for we are here also largely in the same boat, is that its members, not having a Wagnerian sense of orchestra, have written their most important compositions for that humble instrument, the piano. Albeniz,¹

¹This statement, those who have followed admiringly Mr. Kurt Schindler's concerts of the Schola Cantorum, New York, of Spanish choral music, will accept only with reservations. Fascinating as is the piano music of Albeniz, the choral music of a Nicolai is just as fascinating. Nothing precisely like it exists anywhere else, and it is not at all a far-fetched prophecy that for a revival of the interest in choral music our American (and other) composers will have to sit at the feet of these practically unknown Spanish masters.—*Ed.*

first of the school to achieve fame, and its most vigorous member, wrote his best and most characteristic compositions in the form of four volumes of piano pieces known as "Iberia." These pieces are replete with interesting things and their study is well worth the while of any American composer. The unfortunate death of this man at the age of 48, when he was just coming to the fulness of his powers, has undoubtedly robbed Spain in particular and the world in general of some very beautiful music.

Enrique Granados also, whose death from drowning on the Sussex in 1916, when at the height of his career, so shocked the musical world, did his most characteristic work for piano. He was a pupil of Pedrell. His most interesting work is a suite for piano, "Goyescas," so named because they are interpretations of some of the pictures of Goya. It was on this piano suite that he based the music for an opera of the same name produced at the Metropolitan the winter before his death. Like the "Iberia" of Albeniz, the Goyescas music employs the rhythms of the Spanish folk-dances with that exotic verve which seems to lend itself peculiarly to the piano. Indeed, it is safe to say that with the exception of Debussy no one has written more gratefully for the piano in recent years than have Albeniz and Granados. Incidentally, their piano technique is largely original and some of the difficulties of performance of this music make Chopin études seem like five-finger exercises.

Manuel de Falla and Joaquin Turina, the two most prominent living representatives of this school, are so close to us that we cannot form a just estimate of their abilities. Turina seems to be following the piano tradition of Albeniz and Granados. His best known works are his three "Andalusian Dances" and his suites for piano "Séville" and "Coins de Séville." De Falla is attempting more ambitious things. I spoke of his ballet "Three Cornered Hat," successfully produced in London. Among his other works are an orchestral suite, "Nuits aux Jardins d'Espagne," and an opera, "La Vie Briève." From what these two men have written it is already possible to generalize that they are both working along the lines laid down by their predecessors. Their works are strongly colored throughout by Spanish folk-dances.

Taken as a whole, the work of this school, which includes a number of lesser known men such as Enric Morera, Breton, Chapi, Sancho-Marraco, Usadizaga, Espla, del Campo, and others, is really a brilliant reflection of the great flame burning to the north in France. Albeniz, for example, was the friend and associate of d'Indy, Dukas, and Fauré. But although it has naturally taken

the secondary place in the interest of the world, and although its developments were somewhat lost sight of because unfortunate enough to coincide with the World War, it has none the less achieved results of the first importance. When at its best this modern Spanish music is very beautiful and stamps its authors as men of the greatest talent, if not of genius.

The moral of our little story is obviously this: if the Spaniards be really our musical kin, should not this young Spanish school be also our special inspiration? Twenty-five years ago Spanish music was practically stagnant. To-day they have a small but beautiful musical literature and a flourishing school. To be sure, America lacks a musical background of Jotas, Fandangos, Seguidillas, Aragonesas, Habaneras, and the innumerable other Spanish Dances. This deficiency we shall have to fill as best we may; suffice it for the moment to show that those things which the Spanish school used as its fundamentals are so close to our popular musical sympathies. And it seems rational to believe that consideration of this vital matter should aid us in our struggles to develop an art-music of our own.